

## Oceanic Negroes: Communicating Pacific Blackness Down, Out, and Under

KHADIJAH COSTLEY WHITE<sup>1, 2</sup>  
Rutgers University, USA

Blackness is its own salient racial identity within Australian discourse, in part due to colonial legacies, pan-African activism, global media, and the ongoing influence of the 1970s' American Black Power movement. In this article, I examine Australian Blackness as an identity that is cultivated through media interaction and discursive norms. As the terms "white (fellas)" and "Black (fellas)" are largely employed through in-group vernacular exchanges, I interviewed 27 Aboriginal Australian people about the personal significance of Blackness for them. Pulling from methods of narrative analyses and interethnic discourse, I ask the following questions: In what ways do Aboriginal people as a minority deploy and make meaning of Black identity through discourse and media consumption? How does their talk about Blackness frame its political and cultural significance, particularly in relation to Black people in the United States? I examine Black Pacific identity outside of (and in relation to) the Black Atlantic and the African diaspora.

*Keywords: Australia, race, Blackness, media, diaspora, activism*

*The Blacks of Australia are, with the exception of the Bosjemen, the lowest and most irreclaimable for the native tribes with which we are acquainted . . . they are as a race truly irreclaimable.*

—*Illustrated London News*, April, 1852 (Stevens, 1972, p. 43)

"You can't use that word!!" a white male colleague told me angrily. I paused, surprised at the emotional response.<sup>3</sup> I was describing my project, in which I was conducting interviews with Aboriginal Australians about their beliefs and connections to Blackness. I had wandered through festivals and cultural centers open to the public and filmed those who were willing to answer questions about how they understood their own Blackness. I hoped to interrogate the tensions and connections to a global Black identity for

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Khadijah Costley White: khadijah.white@rutgers.edu

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<sup>1</sup> Please see the accompanying video; Figure 1 (Costley White, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> The author would like to thank Fredrika Thelandersson for her research support and assistance.

<sup>3</sup> In this article, I capitalize Black but not white—while that differs from the APA style guide, it does conform to AP and is better explained, here: <https://apnews.com/article/archive-race-and-ethnicity-9105661462>. This is a deliberate political and writerly choice to demonstrate an equity approach to discussing race/racism. Also, see Laws (2020) for further explanation.

Aboriginal people—and the media that represented and fueled these identities. I stepped gingerly around the cross-cultural conflicts I encountered. My senior white male colleague was pushing back against my use of the word “blackfella.” In my interviews, I had been told by Aboriginal and Indigenous Australian interviewees that because of a shared history of racial oppression, I as a fellow Black woman was culturally granted use of the word “blackfella” in the Australian context. But now, in a classroom at a southern Australian university—a white Australian told me that I had crossed a line.

The contradictions in local and transcontinental norms highlighted in this exchange gestured to the complexity of studying Black identity in Australia. The terms “whitefellas” and “blackfellas” are largely vernacular categories in Australia; explicit referents to Black identity are excluded from official legislation and policy (Cowlshaw, 1998, 2006b). As a scholar exploring the meaning and transnational implications of Blackness in the Australian context, I felt it was important to look at how people explain it and make meaning of it in conversation. In studying how Blackness is defined through Aboriginal talk, this project turns to the location of its primary enactment and reification. In the process, it also draws on tensions that lie at the center of how Blackness circulates and maps onto different bodies in the postcolony.

In Australia, Black identity exists outside of a Pan-African or African diasporic framework (though also located firmly within those exchanges). This emphasis on indigeneity in the formation and development of Black identity in Australia makes space to focus on Black discourses that lie outside the history of slavery and exile. Blackness is described in Australia as an ethnic identity and not necessarily a racial one (Keen, 1988). And in Australia, Black identity among Aboriginal people is widely treated as a trope that supplements their “real” identity as Indigenous peoples (Minestrelli, 2017). How does an ethnic Blackness, one somehow linked more to cultural and familial tradition than biological ancestry—a Blackness linked to racial solidarity and not the Middle Passage—take shape in the contemporary world?

Blackness, of course, exists as a transnational identity that has deep relevance to Australia. In Australia, U.S. representations of Blackness in news and popular culture have led to shared language about racial progress, oppression, and liberation<sup>4</sup>. Black resistance movements in the 20th century, from Garveyism to the Black Panthers, produced books, films, and thinkers carried on radio and television waves around the world. The work of thinkers and writers like C.L.R. James, Franz Fanon, Malcolm X, James Baldwin, W.E.B. DuBois, Eldridge Cleaver was circulated and studied among Black organizers and activists globally, including in Australia (Foley, 2000; Trometter, 2015). In particular, portrayals of American

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<sup>4</sup> Kamari Maxine Clarke and Deborah Thomas (2006) describe “popular cultural forms” as the “conduits for the conceptualization of Blackness globally” and argue that popular culture “has been seen as one of the very few sites in which Atlantic populations have been able to articulate alternative political, economic, and social visions, given their historical marginalization from center of political, economic, and social power” (p. 24). For these reasons, Clarke and Thomas (2006) argue that popular cultures “are sites from which we can analyze shifting expressions of subjectivity and the articulation of complementary subjectivities” (p. 24).

Blackness made for global consumption—such as Hollywood films depicting Black history or news coverage of civil rights activism—provided meaning for Blackness around the world.<sup>5, 6</sup>

Academic discussions of the Black Pacific are generally overdetermined by focusing on the influence, presence, or integration of people of African descent living within Asia.<sup>7</sup> In discussions of diasporic Blackness, Paul Gilroy's (1993) seminal text, *The Black Atlantic*, reflects dominant scholarly understandings of Blackness (and even the Black Pacific) as tied to the Atlantic and the intermixing and migration of Africans to Asia, Europe, the Caribbean, and the New World. Gilroy draws on the image of a ship as a metaphor for "a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system" (p. 4) moving through these places. A focus on slavery as a definitive quality of Blackness is frequently echoed in scholarship on global Black identity. But, as Bond, Mukandi, and Coghill (2018) note, for Black folks in the "Down Under," "it is Australia, not slavery, that is the cage from within Blackfullas sing" (p. 418).

This article examines the discourses about a Pacific-borne Black identity, with the assumption that Black Pacific identity not linked to an African diaspora resituates and challenges dominant understandings of Blackness as tied to the Atlantic (and Aboriginal identity as primarily Indigenous).<sup>8</sup> My Americanness in contrast with the Australianess of my interviewees provided a way to pry at this Atlantic/Pacific juxtaposition.

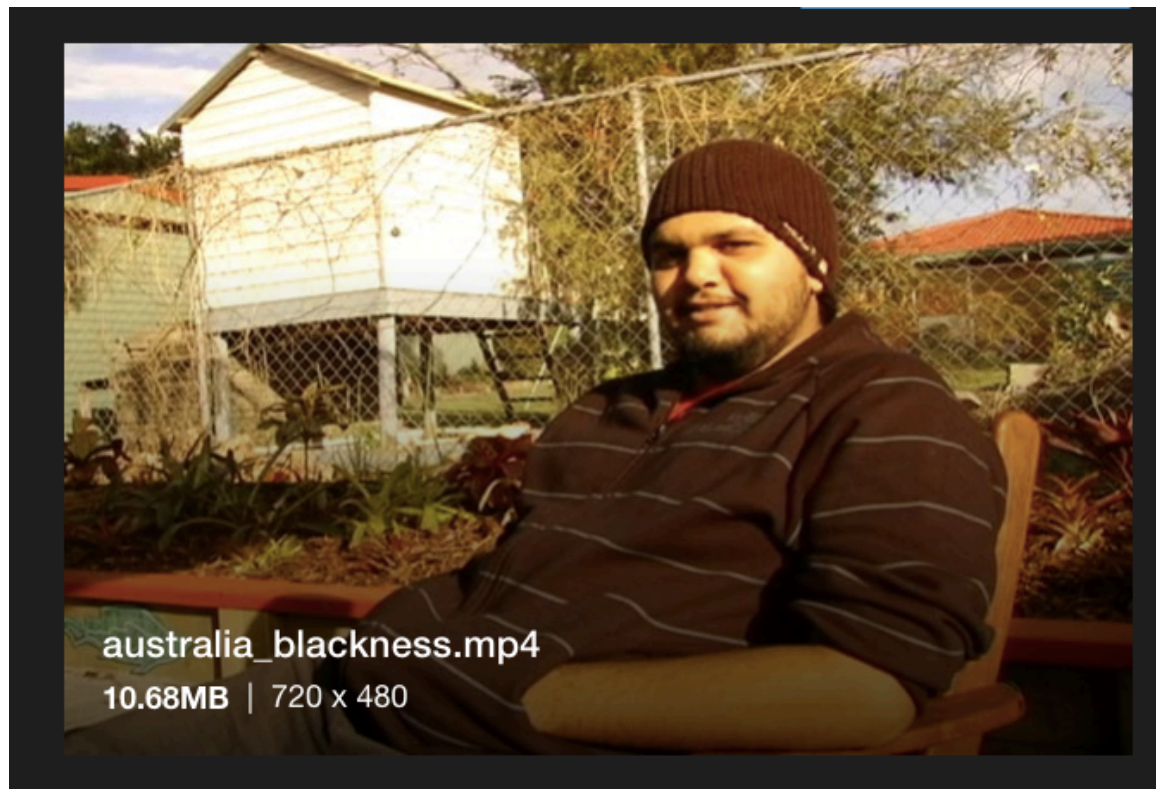
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<sup>5</sup>For example, Tariq Modood's (2008) work describes British Asians who identified as Black through their own sense of belonging and resistance.

<sup>6</sup> Herman Gray (2015) argues that the Black freedom struggles provided a "moral indexicality" that "once critically indexed the affective conditions of subordination—pain, suffering, loss—and the aspirations, dreams, hopes, and desires for Black freedom" (p. 1109).

<sup>7</sup> This is not to suggest that Gilroy (1993) does not offer important ways to think about Blackness outside of the Atlantic. He pushes back at any notion of an essential or universal formation of Black identity; instead, he argues that Black identity must be understood through flows and interlinkages, not solely in one particular place or time, but rather as an identity that crosses continents and national boundaries.

<sup>8</sup> I write this with the understanding that Black identity is neither monolithic nor static, and that, as Lisa Lowe (2015) points out, Black identity sprung at the intersections of Asian, indigenous, and white culture in Western colonies throughout the world. As she writes, "Elaborations of racial difference were not universal or transhistorical; they did not occur all at once but were local, regional, and differential, articulated in dynamic, interlocking ways with other attributions of social difference within various spaces in an emerging world system" (p. 6). Moreover, resulting philosophies that impacted and helped fuel the development of Black identity in the United States and in other places were also the products of global connections, study, and movement-building. For example, Lowe cites the influence of Berlin and Chinese education and philosophy on the work of renowned Black sociologist, W.E.B. DuBois. While I focus on the impact of U.S. notions of Blackness on Australian Black identity formation throughout this article, I keep in mind that Black American identity was, too, influenced by these global interconnections and shared theory-building.



**Figure 1. Accompanying article multimedia content—"We Were All Black" (See Costley White, 2009).**

### **Blackness**

I am a Black woman from the northeastern United States, a third-generation New Jersey girl. My own Blackness is bound deeply to American slavery and the impact of the transatlantic slave trade. My family ties come originally from South Carolina and Georgia, and then follow the post-Civil War Black migration to the north to flee the trauma and poverty of the South. I currently live in a majority-white upper middle class suburb bordered by the impoverished predominantly Black cities and towns where I largely grew up (and where many of my loved ones continue to live).

My sense of Black identity is connected to, shaped by, and historically situated within these places, their social discourses, narratives, and everyday encounters. My family's migration from the deep South and the challenges of transitioning to life in a segregated North are key to the way I understand Black identity. The parameters of my Blackness are marked by taste, comfort, family, and fashion, an interplay of consumption and domesticity, publicity and privacy. I mention my own experiences not simply to talk about my personal life, but, to quote Roderick Ferguson (2004), "to demonstrate the ways in which epistemology is encountered personally" (p. viii).

In bringing my understanding of Blackness to the Australian coast, I looked to understand Blackness in Australia through Hall's (1996) definition of identity as both the "discursive formation and practices which constitute the social field" (p. 7) as well as the ways in which we see and understand ourselves. Bond et al. (2018) propose that global Blackness functions to reveal the racial fictions and boundaries of freedom in settler-colonial societies. Hall (1993) adds that Black subordination in white-dominated society has meant that Black people have used their own bodies to become the "canvasses of representation" (p. 474), signifying and coding Black identity in popular culture as community, aesthetics, and struggle. A component of this project aimed to examine how Blackness in popular culture is read as identity among Black Australians and how they use their own bodies to express Blackness in Australia.

I expected that any investigation of Black identity in Australia, particularly as conveyed between a Black American researcher and Black Australian interviewees, would make meaning through the use of shared iconography, mass media representations, and anticolonial discourses. My Blackness has also been influenced by media that depict and convey Black identity for mass consumption, such as *The Cosby Show* (Carsey & Werner, 1984–1992), *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (Jones, 1990–1996), hip-hop and gospel music, and films such as *The Color Purple* (Guber & Spielberg, 1985). These texts provide opportunities for mutual experiences and references for Blackness and Black culture, both producing and expanding Blackness and its cultural value. While media representation of identity might be plastic (Warner, 2017) and attest more to visibility than substantive engagement with specific communities, it still provides a discursive common space by which Black people have come to interrogate and represent themselves and others.

Along these lines, Harvey Young (2010) writes that it "is not that all Black people have the same experience; it is, rather, that a remarkable similarity, a repetition with a difference, exists among embodied Black experience" (p. 5). Michelle Wright (2015) adds that Blackness is "largely a matter of perception or . . . made up of performance in which performers understand their bodies as Black" (p. 3). For Wright (2015), the reception of the performance of Blackness by its audience is not central to Blackness—rather, "Blackness is in the mind of the performers" (p. 3). This project also examines, then, what the performance of Blackness means in the context of Aboriginal identity.

Scholarship that focuses on the Middle Passage as a defining attribute in understanding Blackness miss the impact of these circulations on the development of (and influence from) Black Pacific identity. Freed American Blacks arrived at the shores of Australia with Briton colonizers in the 18th century (Pybus, 2006). They, no doubt, contributed to the development of Black Australian identity among the indigenous peoples who were called "Black" by white colonists. Some Aboriginal Australians identified themselves as "part of a worldwide Black community" (Pybus, 2006, p. 179) early in Australian colonization. Wright (2015) notes:

The intersection of Blackness with indigeneity in the Americas, Australia, and Africa also subverts the notion of a "purely" diasporic Blackness, even within the progress narrative itself, because the latter honors indigeneity as the "origin" to which the collective must eventually return. In this moment of interpellation, origin/home is achieved not necessarily through return but through intersections with other "first nations" in the Atlantic and Pacific. (p. 151)

Black identity in Australia is produced by dynamic points of convergence and contact within a Black diaspora.

A diasporic Blackness in this context is produced by modes of exchange and connection among Black-identified peoples. In the preoccupation with the transatlantic, Wright (2015) says that we miss the “multidimensionality” of Blackness that transverses space and time (p. 150). Tina Campt (2002) takes this up by pointing to the way that resources in the Black diaspora are borrowed, exchanged, and adapted within Black communities around the world to help resist power, engage politics, and express belonging. A Black diaspora, Campt (2002) explains, can be “less a concrete geographical trajectory than a set of relations constructed actively by communities for specific purposes towards particular ends” (p. 97).

A Black diaspora presumes the movement and flows of Blackness to and throughout the spaces in which Blackness exists—that is, Blackness is the function, production, and lived experience of Black-identified peoples’ migrations, interactions, depictions, subjugations, *and* imaginations. Blackness is both specific to each setting and broadly general to global discourse. There is not one particular place from which Blackness originates or emanates, but rather its circulations, exchanges, and representations in media help us understand what Blackness means. In this way, Young (2010) explains that the “phenomenon of the Black body, or, for short, phenomenal Blackness invites the consideration of history, habit, memory, and the process of racial mythmaking” (p. 9). Exploring Black Australian identity provides such an opportunity.

### **Black Australia**

*“Did you tell my missus that any white woman who married a . . . blackfellow ought to be shot? Did you ask my wife about our private business? Did you ask her what sort of nature did I have . . . black or white?”—testimony of Jimmy Governor, an Aboriginal Australian man on trial after allegedly killing five white women and girls in 1900.*

—as cited in Cowlshaw and Morris (1997, p. 104)

Although confined largely to the discursive realm of everyday talk and some media narratives, Blackness is an identity in Australia with a deep historical, social, and political meaning for Aboriginal peoples. When Western invaders first arrived in Australia in 1770, they declared the continent *terra nullis* (uninhabited) and called the dark-skinned Indigenous people who already dwelled there “oceanic negroes” (Cornwell, 1847, p. 308; Habibis & Walter, 2009). They placed Black Australians at the bottom of a global racial hierarchy defined by a reverence for whiteness and a pervasive belief that eradicating Blackness was key to societal progress. As some African Americans arrived in Australia with the First Fleet, Black and Aboriginal identities have likely been mutually constituted in ongoing connections through migration, political organizing, sports competitions, artistic exchange, and visits from seafaring Black Americans.

While references to Black identity surface within research that studies Aboriginal people—especially the transnational impact of Black American identity and media flows—specific analyses of how Australian people articulate and describe Black identity are rare. Blackness and Aboriginality are often used interchangeably in academic discussions of Australian Blackness, without closely investigating the distinctions in meaning and context embedded in their political and social uses and invocations.

Black identity remains key to how Aboriginal Australians see themselves, even though their Blackness differs from the history and trajectory of other Black peoples around the world (McKee, 1997). In

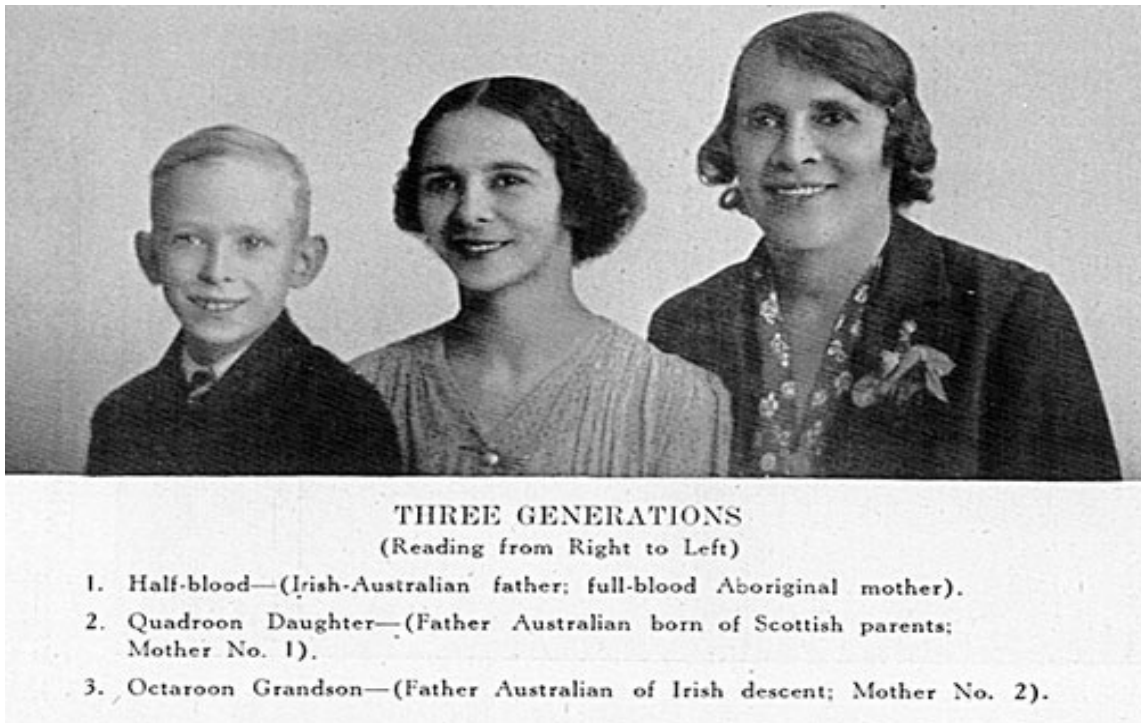
discussions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men about what it means “to be a strong Black man,” Mukandi et al. (2019) found that interviewees defined Black masculinity as being deeply connected to place and traditions, a unifying experience of surviving whiteness, and having a sense of collective and intergenerational responsibility to family and community (p. 253). According to Chiara Minestrelli (2017), Aboriginal artists use Blackness “as a positive marker of cultural identity (and not as a racial construct) in contrast to the country’s politics of ‘White domination’” (p. 78). The overlays of tropes associated with indigeneity—noble savage, spirituality, mysticism—makes Black identity in Australia unique to its own history and context.

Much of the academic literature about Aboriginal Australians focuses on their identity primarily as native, not Black, peoples. McKee (1997) argues that “whereas the American economy was built on the bodies of African Americans, the Australian imaginary relies rather on the spiritual wealth of the continent’s Indigenous inhabitants” (p. 194). This research examines (and exotifies) Aboriginal art, history, land rights, tribal customs, language, and community practices while limiting any discussion about the continuing significance of “colour” as a key facet of Aboriginality (Morton, 1998; Russell, 2006). Anthropologist Gillian Cowlishaw (Cowlishaw & Morris, 1997) argues that race is avoided within Aboriginal studies because white Australian society considers race consciousness to be a problem that promotes racial tensions. In this restrictive approach, discussions of Indigenous “culture” must also serve as a proxy for racial claims and conclusions that cannot otherwise be expressed through a racial lens. Cowlishaw (2004) observes, “mention of racial difference results in intellectuals getting to work to deny, neutralize, explain, and remove its legitimacy as a descriptor” (p. 10)<sup>9</sup>.

Yet, eliminating racial difference through eradicating Blackness among Aboriginal Australians has been a key facet of Australian nation-building. As a political project, making Black Australians become white was the explicit goal of pseudoscientific eugenicist efforts by the government that formalized anti-Blackness as social policy (Moreton-Robinson, 2004). For much of Australian history, Aboriginal children with at least one white parent, known as “half-castes” (see Figure 2), were forcibly taken from their parents and placed on reserves and missions (Habibis & Walter, 2009; Pattel-Gray, 1998). Propelled by an eager desire to eradicate and “breed out the colour” of Black Australians by assimilating them into whiteness, the white stewards of Aboriginal captives closely monitored perceived levels of whiteness among Aboriginal people on these reservations (and many actively participated in this whitening process through rape and sexual coercion; Figure 2; Broome, 1982; Docker & Fischer, 2000; Habibis & Walter, 2009). The control of Aboriginal people has been inextricably tied to notions of white supremacy and Black inferiority, casting Blackness as primitive (Neville, Oyama, Odunewu, & Huggins, 2014).

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<sup>9</sup> An important article on racism, Black Power, and Aboriginal identity in the academy is Chelsea Watego’s (2021) essay “Always Bet on Black Power”.



**Figure 2. Three Generations, photo of grandmother, mother, and child of Aboriginal descent (Neville, 1947).**

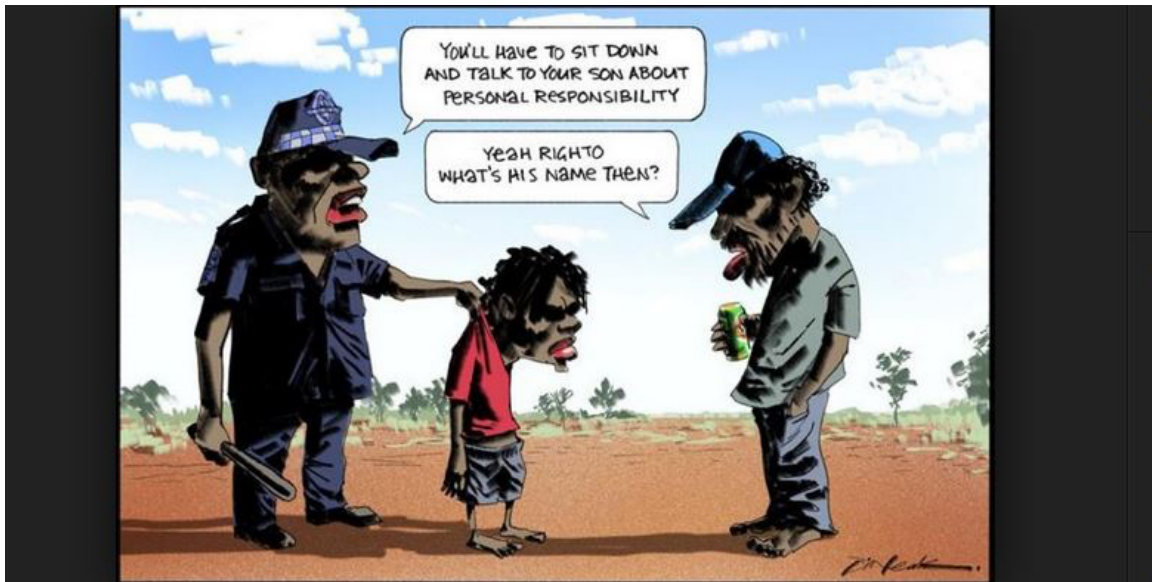
Popular media representations of Aboriginality have also portrayed Aboriginal Blackness as pathology, tying images of Black Australians to distorted physical characteristics and stereotypical behaviors such as bad parenting and substance abuse. A 1988 cartoon depicts a buffoonish rendering of a contemporary Aboriginal man seeing an ancestral image of himself reflected back in the mirror, implying his inability to escape an innate primitivity. Both images in the cartoon draw on what Cowlshaw and Morris (1997) describe as “common signifiers of generic Blackness” in Australia: “heavy brow, large round noses, protruding voluptuous lips” (p. 60; Figure 3).





**Figure 3. Cartoon illustrated by artist Don Lindsay, which appeared in *The West Australian* newspaper on January 4, 1988 (Cowlshaw & Morris, 1997, p. 61).**

More recently, a 2016 cartoon showed the continued modern use of these stereotypes in an image depicting two Aboriginal men and a child as dark-skinned with big lips, animalistic bodies (bare feet and hairy), and inferior cultural and social traits (e.g., bad parenting, substance abuse, criminal behavior, etc.; Figure 4). While Black identity might be limited in how it is explicitly discussed in the Australian public sphere, media representations of these stereotypes and racial signifiers continue to circulate.



**Figure 4. Cartoon illustrated by artist Bill Leak, which appeared in the newspaper *The Australian* in 2016 (Leak, 2016).**

#### **Black Power in Australia**

Pro-Black social discourse and identity for Aboriginal Australians are most widely recognized as emerging during the transnational Black resistance movements of the 1960s and 1970s, as Indigenous Australians were just being granted the right to Australian citizenship. Race consciousness and Blackness among Aboriginal Australians had developed in race-based activism throughout the 20th century, such as: the Coloured Progressive Association organizing exchanges with Marcus Garvey and Aboriginal activists in 1903, visits from American servicemen in World War II, a highly publicized trip by Paul Robeson to Australia during the Civil Rights movement, and Aboriginal protests and strategizing as part of the Black Power movement in Australia (Minestrelli, 2017). Roger Bell (1998) links the rise of civil rights and race-based activism in Australia to the Australian media's widespread coverage of American civil rights agitation. Black identity in Australia rose as a product of complex global and domestic processes developed through worldwide connections to and media coverage of Black struggle in the United States and other parts of the world.

The immense attention the Australian news media paid to covering civil rights activism and African-American protests in the United States explains why "Black Power," rather than "Indigenous rights," became the rallying cry of Aboriginal people (Bell, 1998). In Australia, the preponderance of media coverage of Black American resistance movements meant that "Aboriginal activists were less aware of the aims and tactics of 'Red Power' of American Indian activists and likened their social conditions to those of African-Americans and Africans abroad, rather than other Indigenous peoples" (Bell, 1998, p. 85).

Additionally, the treatment of Australian Aboriginals seemed more similar to the experiences of U.S. Black people than to American Indians, for whom some tribes received land, sovereignty, and other dispensations as restitution from the U.S. government.<sup>10</sup>

Black Power also energized and motivated Aboriginal people in their quest for civil rights and equal participation in Australian society (McGuinness, 1972). Black Power Australian activists led protests, marches, and other actions that demanded housing and land rights with signs declaring that "Black is Beautiful" (Clark, 2008, p. 216; Figure 5).<sup>11</sup> Through books, film, radio serials, and Australian press coverage of U.S. events, Australian audiences engaged regularly with the debates and crises affecting America from far away, bringing clarity to the battles against racism and disenfranchisement at home (Osborne & Lewis, 2001). Pan-African activism in the United States and within other Black struggles in the Caribbean and Africa made important transcontinental personal connections with Aboriginal activists in Australia.



**Figure 5. Aboriginal Black Power activists in the 1970s (Piccini, 2016).**

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<sup>10</sup> This not to say that the plight of American Indians in the United States did not impact Australian decision making about Aboriginals. In fact, Bell (1998) says that their shared experiences were used at times to spur similar efforts in both countries, such as the Aboriginal Children's Research Project in New South Wales, drawing on the 1970 U.S. Federal Indian Child Welfare Act as an exemplar.

<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that scholars have understood Australian Blackness as a rhetorical apparatus used to provoke Australian media and reach their audiences. In discussing the Australian Black Panther Party, Kathy Lothian (2005) argues that the Aboriginal attraction to the Black Panthers "was centered not on a commitment to the revolutionary ideology of the American Panthers, but on the extraordinary visual and rhetorical power that they commanded" (p. 189). Other scholars also recognize the function of Black power as a "media-grabbing" tool for Aboriginal activism (Bell, 1998; De Lorenzo, 2005, p. 142).

In embarking on face-to-face interviews with Aboriginal people in Australia, I expected that this history and media portrayals of militancy, nationalism, and protest would foreground definitions of Blackness for Aboriginals in the contemporary moment. So, too, would my own family ties, media references, and identity play a role in the discussions that would unfold. Within divergent histories of Black oppression, genocide, and assimilation foregrounding our experience of Blackness, I aimed to better understand a 21st-century rendering of Black Australian identity.

### **Approaches**

It is through interviews that “we invite stories” and through that process we accept that “the research interview is a collaborative conversation, a discursive event involving give and take between speakers who operate within the constraints of broader social discourses” (Riessman, 2016, p. 369). To draw attention to the specificity of Black identity in Australia, my discussions with interviewees also necessarily attempted to speak through these discursive spaces of shared meaning to better understand particular significance. As a result, in this project I drew on questions about the media to engage and invoke my respondents’ ideas about Blackness, about their transnational intersections (including connections with my own embodied Americanness), and the language by which they framed their Black identity. It helped provided a more in-depth and current understanding of Blackness against the backdrop of Australia’s history, exclusion, and racialization of Aboriginal peoples.

I analyzed the talk of my subjects to “get closer to an experiential realm in contrast to academic analyses that deal with the symbolic or textual expressions of this relationship” (Cowlshaw, 2006a, p. 430). That is, I interviewed Aboriginal Australians to capture Blackness as a vernacular phenomenon and tracked the ways Black racial identity was produced through their talk. As Riessman (2016) notes, the dynamic exchange inherent to interviews makes it “hard to justify excluding the listener/questioner from an inquiry” (p. 369). In my interviews, I understood that my own identity would shape the responses to my questions—my interviewees’ interpretations and understandings of my American Blackness prompted their own particular responses and engagements.

The focus of my questions to respondents concerned the sources of their ideas and notions of Blackness, especially about media consumption and depictions. In drawing on Veronika Kalmus’s (2003) framework for interrogating minority identity within discourse, this project asks: How do Aboriginals enact and negotiate Black identity through discursive practices? How do they talk about Blackness? How do they ground their arguments? Lastly, what media, discourses, and experiences do they draw on in the constitution of their discourse? I looked for topics that surface in relation to Black identity (e.g., music, television, housing, law enforcement, racism, etc.) and discursive propositions related to this identity (e.g., separatism, land rights, education, etc.). As such, I used my interview questions to elicit the importance of Blackness as part of the discourse of my subjects’ everyday lives.

### **Participants**

*Shawn is one of my interview subjects—he is a burly, middle-aged man with a big gray-black beard and longish hair that flies in the wind. He wears the cloaks of storyteller,*

*family leader, shaman, and memory-keeper all at the same time. His stories tumbled out, revealing the hurt, pain, hate, distress of being an Indigenous person during the times of the Stolen Generation and the emerging Black Power movement in Australia. As a youth he was called a nigger, found racial solidarity with other Black Australians, and fought "whitefellas" who harassed him in public venues. Like many of my other interviewees, Shawn sees himself as a Black person in a world made for and by whites.*

I interviewed a total of 27 Aboriginal individuals from ages 7–79 about Aboriginal identity and Blackness (see Table 1). These interviews were collected in various sites throughout Brisbane (or its traditional Turrbal indigenous name, *Meanjin*) and the Sunshine Coast.

**Table 1. Interviewees by Gender and Age.**

Ages	Male	Female
Under 18	5	2
18–35	1	3
35–55	8	4
55 and over	1	3
Total	15	12

### **Findings**

Various themes emerged as interviewees explained their ideas about Blackness and its relevance as a personal identity. They described the relationship that Blackness had to Aboriginal identity, the positive and negative associations of Black identity, and the continuing connections to American Blackness and its media portrayals.

#### **Relevance of Black Identity to Aboriginal Identity**

Several interviewees grappled significantly with answering my questions around Blackness, often offering up contradictory answers about their own use of the identifier "Black." For example, one 74-year-old woman initially began our conversation by explaining that she does not use the word "blackfella" because she now has white grandchildren. But later, she invoked the importance of Blackness as a unifying cultural identifier with a vibrant familial and community history. She explained that she and other community elders remind their white grandchildren that despite how they might appear, "they're still blackfellas," signaling that her family's "Blackness" remains an important aspect of their identity (P-23).

Similarly, a 36-year-old woman said that "I may not look Black to you mob, back home there in the States, but I'm Black on the inside" (P-06). A 40-year-old man told me what it was like to grow up as "the only Black people" (P-09) in his hometown. Overwhelmingly, less respondents referred to themselves as Black than Aboriginal/Indigenous (or by the specific regional and ethnic group from which they descended, such as Murri, Suasi Islander, Birigaba, or Koori), but Black identity was still a salient identity for the majority of my interviewees, despite not being used as the one they felt most defined them.

Frequently, interviewees had difficulty separating Blackness from Aboriginal or Indigenous identity. Several people said that they were “the same.” One woman explained that “it’s really hard to say” what the difference between Black and Aboriginal is: “We all have different colors,” she asserted (P-22). As another woman said, “[Black and Aboriginal] are more or less the same, as far as I’m concerned,” but she then indicated that she would rather be referred to as Aboriginal if she had to choose (P-18). Most respondents expressed a similar preference. Still, interviewees indicated that while the categories do not necessarily sit neatly together and Aboriginal feels like a more fitting description, they are nevertheless used interchangeably.

Another participant drew a distinction between Blackness as a racial designation versus Aboriginal as invoking indigeneity and a “stronger” cultural signifier that conveys specific ties to “this land . . . that I’m a true inhabitant of this country” (P-03). Additional participants from children to adults said related things about Aboriginal as an identifier communicating a stronger tie and claim to Australian “land.” One interviewee summarized the distinction between Black American and Black Australian identity succinctly: “I find that the Blacks in the States don’t know where their country is, where in Australia, we do. This is our land” (P-10).

Still, another interviewee explained that “Black” is more powerful than “Aboriginal” because of its symbolism and ties to global activism:

Aboriginal power would probably not be as effective as Black power because when you say Black power you think immediately of the fist in the air and the symbols behind the Black Panthers and things like that. . . . They do that. They put their hand up in a fist. That’s from America. (P-07)

Blackness as a fluid and contested cultural signifier was a common refrain among interview participants, as were its transnational connections. Though many were proud to be “blackfellas,” their assessment of it and its use as a personal identifier varied greatly.

### **Defining Black Identity**

Most of my respondents offered up positive associations with Blackness. As a form of resistance, positive associations with Black identity have shown to be key in raising Aboriginal children and preparing them for the inevitable encounter with societal racism and color consciousness is an important part of Aboriginal social development (Keen, 1988). My interviews confirmed a sense of Blackness as important to their self-value and sense of self. Phrases and connections to being Black that surfaced in this regard include considering Blackness “a badge of pride,” a symbol of community, strength, and solidarity. As one woman remarked:

What it means to be Black in Australia, it means for us to be proud of who we are in our cultural heritage. That is what being Black is. It is not something to be ashamed of or to be afraid of or something that we should hide. (P-01)

In this way, claiming a Black identity was seen as a show of resistance.

The same woman also expanded upon the notion of Black identity as a indicative of pride, and said,

I would be proud to be called a Black Australian. I am proud of being Black. When we greet each other, the thing is to build pride in our young men, we will call them "Black man." It is not a derogatory term or it is not humiliating. It is a strengthening. (P-01)

In consciously acknowledging Blackness as a means to build up young male community members, it is clear that Black identity held for him a valuable way of being in Australian Aboriginal communities. According to these interviewees, Blackness has been a means by which one could express pride, rather than shame, in their cultural heritage despite oppression throughout Australian history. As one teen noted, a commonly quoted Maori phrase is "Too Black, too strong" (P-21).

Relatedly, I was told that self-referential uses of the term "Black" serve as a signal of intragroup pride, "a friendship thing between us." As one person put it, Aboriginals use it "when we talk about ourselves, [but] White man can't use it," making clear that the label is offensive and seen as an insult when spoken by whites (P-06). When asked for clarification, she continued:

When we talk about ourselves, "All them blackfellas down there," or whatever, we use that word [...]. but like I said, as soon as the white man uses that word, then we put up a defensive barrier and say, "Hang on! [...]" because it's always been that derogatory term portrayed in the media. (P-06)

Another man said that if a "whitefella" called him Black, he "would rather knock his head off," clearly indicating that "Black" is reserved only for intragroup identification and mutual recognition (P-10). In this way, a respondent drew a distinction between "Black" and other racial slurs for Aboriginal people like "abo" or "nigger" (P-01). "Black" was a term in which meaning and significance depended more keenly on context, use, and situation.

Interviewees expressed this intragroup acknowledgement of Blackness as legacy and heritage. Blackness was described as powerful, beautiful, and tough, and a connection to other Black people. The same respondent said that

[to be Black] means to be proud of who you are, your identity and your connection because we are connected not only with the land but with the people. Each Aboriginal person, we have that connection and it is the Blackness that is connected. (P-01)

Describing his connection to Blackness through his family genealogy, this participant situated his Blackness as an inherited pride that creates unbreakable connections within the community. Another man said that Black identity was a way for different Indigenous groups from all over Australia to "com[e] together and united as one" (P-03).

### Negative Aspects of Black Identity

Some informants, however, had negative opinions of the use of the word "Black" as an identifier, generally because of its lack of applicable specificity to Aboriginals in the face of other Black immigrants and settlers in Australia. These folks described "Black" as a term that is too broad and encompassing, leaving little room for intragroup particularities and far too much room for rampant stereotyping. However, one interviewee noted that everyone in the world could be considered "Aboriginal" or first peoples of a place, and that the term was also too broad (P-14).

A number of interviewees also complained about the derogatory and racist use of the referent "Black" by whites as directed toward Aboriginals. One woman indicated that other Australians look at Black people with the mentality "we don't have to care about your culture, your history, you're beneath us," while many others recounted their everyday encounters with racist peers (P-04). For example, one man recalled two young girls calling him names as a kid: "They started calling me 'blackie,' and, oh, I don't know, 'nigger,' and all that sort of stuff" (P-14).

Because of this everyday racism, Black is not a formal racial category in Australia used by public officials in policy or political rhetoric. "They know not to use it because it is just the same as nigger. They don't use it," one participant told me, "We expect people to respect that" (P-01). He further elaborated that, "I think Black people in America, I think they are proud of being Black. They are not afraid of it." And while one interviewee explained that "Black" was a "degrading word" in Australian discourse, he saw its use in America as an accepted identity as "strange, [but] cool" (P-03).

Several interviewees explained Blackness as an identity that inherently signaled oppression. "You go to other communities and other areas of Australia and people will just look 'you're Black, we don't have to respect you,'" explained a 23-year-old woman (P-04). "The blackfella is still down the lowest rung of the ladder," said another woman (P-06). Another participant explained that Blackness meant the continuing need for Aboriginal people to "fight for basic rights" and to "live in two worlds. . . . Living and trying to keep all of the culture" (P-03). One 47-year-old man of Suasi Islander descent brought up a shared history of slavery between his ancestors and African Americans to explain what Blackness represented (P-25), while another man described his brother's mistreatment and abuse in jail (P-09).

Other people discussed what being Black meant in Australia's larger social imaginary, i.e., the stereotypes that Black Australians are criminals, deviants, and alcoholics. One of my informants told me that "even going to church" he experiences the effects of these beliefs: "You see the whitefellow, white women, you come and sit beside them, they'll put their bag on the opposite side of them, suggesting that I might steal their money" (P-10). These racist stereotypes run extremely deep through the Australian public sphere, and another interviewee told me that this affects her community's life outcomes in the most essential ways. "Blackfellas" have difficulty in securing opportunities for homeownership and are assumed to be less competent than their white counterparts, making it more difficult for Aboriginals to find suitable and fair work (P-23). A man agreed, saying, "We all face racism, don't we? We face poverty, we face lack of work, lack of jobs, lack of . . . . Just being different, people can't accept us, or understand us" (P-10). One interviewee explained that this dynamic was expressed in a single question repeated across generations: "Is it because I'm Black?" (P-



04). These long-held social connections between Blackness and a myriad of undesirable qualities have devastating consequences for a community that is still fighting for recognized space and place in their native land, and it complicates the relationship that some Aboriginal Australians seek with Blackness.

### **American Political and Media Symbols for Australian Blackness**

To understand the ways in which the media connected to Aboriginal understandings of Blackness, I also asked questions about media consumption. When asked about media uses and political signifiers among “blackfellas,” outside of shows that centered around Aboriginal people, participants frequently referenced American film, television, politics, and music—country music, reggae, R&B (rhythm and blues), and hip hop in particular.

One male participant in his 50s mentioned that he liked films that featured racial injustice in the United States because of similarities to the experience of “our Indigenous people” (P-03). For him, film and television portrayals of the Black American experience revealed the similarities of transcontinental Blackness regarding “a lot of the living standards, educational opportunity, high employment.” Another 35-year-old man explained that because of government policies that took language and culture from Indigenous Australians, media featuring “Black America” allowed youth to “assert their identity” (P-05). A 12-year-old boy in another interview seemed to support this idea, explaining that he watched American movies and they made him wish he was born in America. “We, like, live on the streets some of us. We just all . . . we’re the same” (P-08). One woman pointed to the lack of representation of Aboriginal Blackness on television and the overrepresentation of American and African Blackness in Australian media as a reason why Australian youth were “connecting with something that is real to them” (P-20).

While country music was a common preference, so, too, did subjects mention consuming dominant Black American music forms like R&B and hip hop. A 12-year-old explained that he liked American rapper Tupac Shakur because “he speaks about his culture and all that” (P-08). Another teen explained that hip hop “just makes me feel good” (P-11). A 35-year-old interviewee who grew up listening to hip hop groups like Public Enemy and NWA described listening to “Black fellas singing” rap as “powerful,” “raw,” and “truth” (P-14).

Additionally, media representations of Barack Obama came up frequently within these interviews and showed Obama’s perceived political relevance and symbolism to the Black Australian experience. A male participant said that Obama “opened the gates maybe for people like us in Australia. It paints a pathway for us to, that we can achieve in the future” (P-03). A 23-year-old woman echoed him saying “that when Barrack Obama did get elected in a lot of us Indigenous people were like, ‘yeah power to the Black fellas’” (P-04). Among my interviewees, Obama functioned as a symbol of hope. As another woman put it, “The Black people in America have led the way . . . as in having a lot of Black people of high power. In Australia, we don’t have as many” (P-07). Later, she continued:

I remember his inauguration. We went to our mom’s. We sat there and we watched it. I said to my daughter, I said, “This is amazing. There’s a Black president.” I never thought I’d seen it. I said to my daughter, “You know what? When Australia has a Black Prime Minister, you’ll probably be a grandmother.” (P-07)

References to American political and media symbols showed their significant impact on Black Aboriginal identity, and its deeply and explicitly transnational roots.

### **Reflection/Discussion**

As a Black American woman, I often felt in interviews that participants were responding to my identity and presumed subject position. I learned firsthand that "Black" is seen only as an in-group, colloquial term that is considered an insult if used by non-Aboriginal people. I was surprised to find that, as an African American, I was received as part of the in-group and told on several occasions that it was okay for me to use the word "Black." Thus, my introduction as a Black American woman granted me some variant of "insider" status in my interview exchanges.

It also seemed to shock my informants that I asked so directly about Black identity, each of them grappling with my open use of a word often viewed as taboo and its varying significance in their own use and beliefs. I wondered frequently if some of them felt that they had to show their cultural solidarity by embracing the term, sidestepping disavowals of Blackness, and denying any shame about being called Black to avoid offending me and make me feel less welcome. This dynamic, of course, made this project part of a larger process of articulating identity shared by Black people across the world—in attempting to capture the types of vital exchanges Audre Lorde and Tina Campt (2002) mark as crucial to freedom movements, my inquiry became its own diasporic dialogue. It, too, gestured to the hegemonic centrality of American identities across the world.

I also had uncomfortable moments in the field when I realized what intracultural ruptures I was opening up with my queries about Blackness. In one instance, I approached a group of Aboriginal people at an event to ask for an interview about Blackness, and they all turned to the darkest woman at the table. With some derision, a few of them suggested that she should sit down with me. Regretting that I had been the source of her humiliation, I watched as she angrily looked at her comrades and asked, "Why me?!" While an embrace of Blackness as a part of their identity was seen as progressive, the stinging denigration of the term in the Australian context clearly lingers. This supports Hickey's (2016) findings that anti-Black racism experienced by Aboriginal Australians is often subtly perpetuated within their own social circles, a manifestation of what Camara Phyllis-Jones (2000) refers to as "internalized racism."

The interviews reflect shared common experiences between Blacks in Australia and other African-descended Blacks around the globe, such as segregation, forced removal of children, domestic terrorism, unpaid labor, concerns about "passing" as white, and a resistance to conforming to European standards. Moreover, most interviewees drew on the Black experience in America as part of a larger global narrative of struggle and resistance in the face of oppression. As Cowlshaw writes of her own experience as an Aboriginal Australian:

It was Black American writers such as Richard Wright and Chester Himes who laid the foundations for the civil rights movement in America in the 1960s and, by extension, it may be claimed that they also initiated the civil rights movement in Australia through the Black Power movement by writing tough and angry books which appealed to black fellows in Australia. Be that as it may, for the young Aborigines of the 1950s and 1960s, there were no other strong black models to emulate and these were embraced with the same

glee with which we had greeted other black heroes such as the boxer, Joe Louis.  
(Cowlshaw & Morris, 1997, p. 261)

For Aboriginal Australians specifically, the experience of racial discrimination, the visual memory of civil rights boycotts and police officers attacking Black Americans with fire hoses and dogs, and the media representations of Blackness made clear the global experience of systematic race-based oppression and postcolonial interconnections. As observed by Cowlshaw (2000), efforts by the government to downplay the history of racial kidnapping and government-enforced eugenicism mean eliminating racial categories like "Black" from official public discourse—but, it seems, this attempt at scrubbing the historical and contemporary record makes the term "Black" an even more poignant and salient identity among Aboriginal people.

In this way, Australian Blackness is defined through relationality, belonging, and community, as rendered by history, skin color, and genealogy, but also through narratives, stories, and ideas. It is produced through mass culture and collective discourses, media, and icons; it is a fiction made real by context and circumstance, and manufactured through shared meaning and recognition. Nicole Fleetwood (2011) argues that Blackness is "visually knowable through performance, cultural practices, and psychic manifestations" (p. 6). Because of the geographic isolation from other Black people, Blackness as a representational field is especially important in Australia, and images of transnational freedom struggles and other Black media representations have helped construct and interpellate Black identity in the Australian Pacific.

The findings in this project have implications for various disciplines and fields. In communication and media studies research, it pushes forward the notion of Blackness as a global media commodity, consumed and employed among various audiences. In particular, it moves media and cultural studies scholars to think of the complexity of Blackness in its representations and its global meaning. For example, a 2015 Australian TV show called *Black Comedy* (O'Toole & Shelper, 2014–2020) interrogates Indigenous identity through humor in a contemporary version of a 1973 Australian sketch show called *Basically Black* (Neill, 2015). It shows Blackness as a mode by which Aboriginal people continue to interrogate power and race, rooted in 1970s Black activism and resistance movements. For Black Studies, consequently, this article contributes to the move toward Pan-Black, and not just Pan-African, Studies. Since there is not much work "on the form and content of resistance discourses" in Australia (Fozdar, 2008, p. 529), an exploration into such a sparsely researched area provides compelling insights for scholars interested in race and Aboriginal identity. In a moment of more mediated interconnectedness than ever before, the key themes around Blackness as a form of kinship, community, and overlapping oppressions that emerged from these interviews signal the ongoing importance of transnational notions of Blackness and activism. With the rise of white nationalism as a contemporary backdrop, the circulation of Black media and representations will no doubt impact forms and discourses of resistance around the world.

In media studies and communication in particular, these findings serve as an important reminder to consider the effects of media and identity on racial diasporas, and the interplay between identities under postcolonialism (imperialist subjectivities) and modernism (national subjectivities). For example, how does a Black diaspora trouble the way we think about African diasporas and aboriginality? How does an Australian Black identity reconceive the way we understand Blackness and Black media in the American context? How does it

shift the hybridity already established within Black identity writ large? To think of American media shaping Black identity and identity formation among Australian Aboriginal peoples necessarily means we should also consider the way that Black identity in Australia has shaped and informed American and other diasporic Black identities (even in light of the uneven distribution of cultural and mass media flows). As Stuart Hall (1993) wrote, interrogating these marginal spaces on the periphery of the mainstream can result in “the production of new identities, of the appearance of new subjects on the political and cultural stage” (p. 106). It is, with respect to the productivity of these ruptures and their impact on how we think about race, media, and culture, that this work continues.

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